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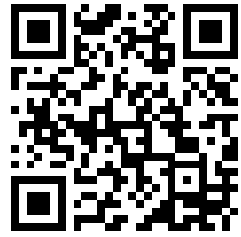

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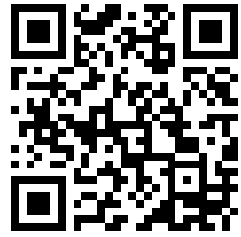

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The Legend of Monte della Sibilla

or Le Paradis de la Reine Sibille

Clive Bell

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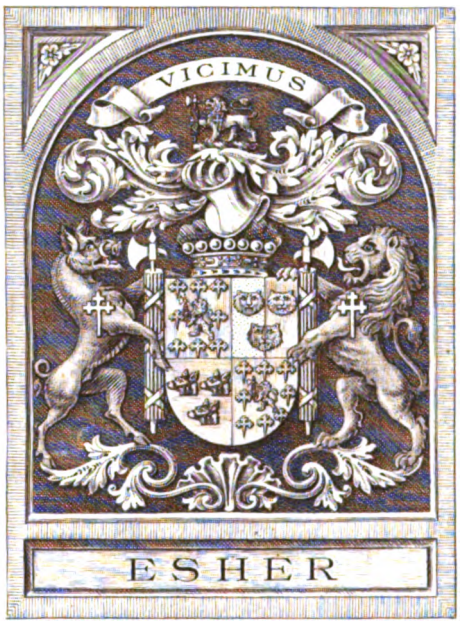

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THE LEGEND OF MONTE DELLA SIBILLA

OR LE PARADIS DE LA REINE SIBILLE

CLIVE BELL

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY
LEONARD AND VIRGINIA WOOLF
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1923

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THE LEGEND OF MONTE DELLA SIBILLA
OR
"LE PARADIS DE LA REINE SIBILLE"

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If you will stop and take a drink
Where I did, late one afternoon
In April, you may see turn pink
A patch of snow, which very soon
Yellows to green: it seems quite near;
But is, in fact, up Norcia way
Or further: the effect's more queer
Than beautiful: and should you say
To the *padrone*, Gian Mannino,
"What peak is that which looks so odd?"
He'll answer, "Monte Sibillino—
But they've bunged up the hole, thank God."

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Herr Hans Van Branbourg, 1310
To 1352 or so,—
(A period, it seems, when men
Not unlike us were apt to go
Five hundred miles to get a thrill
They might have had for sitting still),—
Branbourg, I say, having done the lakes
And all the sights of La Toscana,
(A jaunt which now a fortnight takes,
Less then, because one skipped Verona,
"The Tomb" not having found its owner*),
Came southward by the Val Chiana;
Heard of the Sybil, wouldn't wait,—no,
Not a moment, at Spoleto,
But set off promptly for the cave.
The natives told him he was brave,—
Thinking him mad. Had not a monk,
Il don Antonio Fumato,
There lost his wits, and, in a funk,
Five bold young bucks from near Fossato,
Who made the same attempt before,
At what they heard and what they saw,
(Or was that later?) quaked like jelly,
Shaming the sires of Gabrielle?

* In my opinion it is time
To legalise the cockney rhyme.

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They had seen things to make saints curse,—
A gate that kept on clipping, clipping,
(Much like a storm-door only worse,)
And bound to give you such a nipping
As nips the persons, now and then,
Of thoughtless, shunting, railway-men.
They had felt strange and ghastly winds,
They had heard strange and sudden noises,
And what in Italy one finds
More rarely, gentle, whispering voices:
'Twas woman's doing—never doubt it—
A female influence ruled the air;
And what the coarser said about it
Was, that although when you got there
The place might seem an honest hovel,
Inside, they guessed, you'd find a brothel.

Indeed it was a dangerous place.
But Germans are a stubborn race,
Not to say obstinate, to boot
Are fond of ladies: Herr Van Bran
Swore that if anyone could do't
He, Hans Van Branbourg, was the man;
Pushed on to Norcia, then climbed higher,
And with him went a single squire,
Called Pons—they say an Englishman,
I hope he was, because I can
(As you I think will soon agree)
Pronounce him brave as brave can be,

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Yet sensible as Sancho Panza,
Wherewith I neatly close the stanza.

The knight pushed on, the squire behind,
They cared not tuppence for the wind,
Nor for the strange and sudden noises,
Nor the discreetly whispering voices,
Nor all those signs which long ago
Did duty for a "*numero*".
They passed the gates of bronze. They came
To gates of crystal. Here they tapped.
A lady-porter asked their name:
Whereat the leader boldly rapped
Out that which you've already heard, viz:-
"Herr Hans Van Branbourg, at your service."
The doors flew wide, and to their eyes
Revealed the Sibyl's paradise.

What saw they? Antoine de la Sale,
Who wrote *Les quinze joies* and all
Les cent nouvelles nouvelles as well,
What I could not invent can tell;
Seeing he came in 1420
To hold an inquest on the spot,
And information got in plenty,—
Indeed he clambered to the grot,
But only peeped inside the cavern—
Later, however, at the tavern
He learnt the truth of what befell
Van Branbourg in the Sybil's hell.

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They saw a crowd of pretty girls—
These were the Sybil's seneschals—
Who bade them change their dirty linen
And rigged them out "from the beginning"
(The text has *ab initio*);
Up strike the fiddles; off they go
Through pretty rooms and splendid halls
And gardens framed in sheltering walls,
The which were gay with flowers as well
As comely "*dames et demoiselles*",
Accompanied by knights and squires
In divers fashionable attires,
Much as our Longchamps beauties go
Surrounded by their *gigolos*.

Gaping they go; until they see
'La reine Sibylle', who from her throne
Welcomed the strangers graciously,
Observing she'd already known
Men of their race, which *(vide Tacite)*
Was honest, brave, but inficite,*
And only that for want of practice
In social arts and crafts. The fact is
She much admired the Teuton physique,
(I know some ladies can't abide it),
So murmured, "You're my guests for this week:

* Not 'facete'? No, because in modern times
We're prouder of our Latin than our rhymes.

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Later you'll tell me, when you've tried it,
If you'll become my *pensionnaires.*
I'll only add that we are here
Until the crack of doom." "And then?"
Queried our cautious gentlemen.

"Then we shall see what we shall see,"
Answered the lady airily,
Fobbing them off with such old saws
As rarely fail to elicit roars
Of laughter from the House and Bar,
—As "Wait and see" and "Chi lo sa";
Then, sweetly added, "If you please,
Hear our conditions, which are these.

Who stays
Eight days
May go away the next.
On no pretext
Who stays more
May or durst
Go before
The thirty-first.
Who yet stays more
Must outstay
By one day
His fifteenth score.
Then or never:
For who stays

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Further days
Stays for ever,"*
"Further," said she, "if you will be
My guests, this Paradise of mine
Is at your service; what you see
Of fun and beauty, flowers and wine,
Is for your pleasure: also choose
Amongst my ladies who are free
(There're always plenty on the loose)
Her who most charms you. Certainly
You'll find them charming, trained to please,
To move with grace, converse with ease,
Well bred, well dressed, well read, well meant,
In all ways sweetly competent:"
Whereat squire Pons was "moult" content,
And, plucking at his master's jacket,
Said "Sir, let's stay and stand the racket."

They said they'd stay a week; but when
The week was up they stayed again;
Indeed "*les plaisirs étaient tels*"
Days seemed like hours in that hell:
So says La Sale, who ought to know

* Perhaps I ought to add a line
To say the verse is Sybilline;
It is portentously ill writ;
Scholars must make the best of it.

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What pleasures seemed like years ago,
Seeing he wrote "*Les quinze joies*
De Mariage", but then, *ma foi*,
They took their pleasures* otherwise
Than husbands in that Paradise.

It was an abbey of Thelème,
Compounded with Arabian nights;
Where every sort of pretty game
And wit and wine and all delights
Were shared with pretty, clever girls,
Who never dreamed of being pals;
But were what girls should always be,
In manner prim, in fancy free.
Thus was there hope for everyone,
All were fastidious, none was prude,
Which means flirtation's ticklish fun
Supplanted dreary certitude.
There was the best of everything,
Of wine, of song, and all the rest,
The best to drink, to kiss, to sing,
And taste to know what is the best.
A match for every mood: to please
The thoughtful, cloisters; polished halls
For dancers; vines and olive trees
And rivers under ancient walls

* Both Sale and Andrea Baberino say
"*Le coeur ne saurait les imaginer*".

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Flowing, for every heart's delight,—
Were there: and there was rest by day and mirth by night.

Music there was in every part;
And almost always you could hear
A song or septet by Mozart,
And not a note of Meyerbeer.
There story-tellers had a way
Of being neither dull nor long
But, like Voltaire or Mérimée,
Were rarely sweet and never strong.
Perrons, parterres and green pelouses
Abounded; walks of turf and sand;
And restaurants like La Pérouse;
Fiddles and horns, and no Jazz Band.
There were no bounders and no bores,
No reach-me-downs, no general stores,
No clubs, no colonels, not a hearty
Good fellow there to spoil a party,
No district-visitor or pastor,
And not a sign of Lady Astor.
There were no 'cinemas', no groups
Of shop boys, no colonial troops,
No one who hit straight from the shoulder,
And not a season-ticket holder;
There was nor creditor nor debtor,
There was not in that pleasant land
A soul who wished to make it better,

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All were content to understand
Their happiness; nay, what is more,
No lady wanted for her lover
That kind of smutty, solemn bore,
Who sick with genius, must uncover
For our souls' good his nasty sore:
Believe me there did not exist
A single, small coprologist.
So simple-minded were the ladies
In that old-fashioned Sibyl's Hades.

Alas! pure joy the fates forbid.
Alas! that poet's not an ass
Who has it that an *aliquid*
Amari rises in the glass
Almost invariably when we
Suppose we've cheated destiny.

Van Branbourg, and his British pup too,
Observed that every Friday night,
No matter what they might be up to,
The partners of their dear delight
Slipped off at twelve, upon the stroke,
And left them puzzling out the joke,
As best they might, till Monday morning;
When back their ladies came more kind,
More sweet, than ever. But this warning
Served to unsettle Branbourg's mind.

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He had a Lutheran soul. What malice,
What mischief might they be about?
He tracked them to the Sybil's palace,
And there it was he found them out.
From Friday night to Monday morning,
He found these artless, frolick gadders,
Who left their lovers without warning,
Lay with their queen, asleep like adders;
Not in a peaceful girlish doze,
But serpentlike and comatose.*
"Pish," said the squire, "here are no evils."
The German said, "These girls are devils."

His northern soul was deeply stirred,
He said—"My man, it's time we went,"
Which good squire Pons thought quite absurd,
And said so. "Pons, d'you know we've spent
Here," groaned his chief, "three hundred days,
Abounding in lascivious ways.
Pack up, and say 'good-bye' my man."
Thus spake the Prussian Knight, Van Bran.

The ladies, as you may suppose,
Were *navrées*, *marries*, quite upset.
They had to let them go because
Such was the formal bargain. Yet

* Sale says they "*a la manière*
De couleuvres et de serpents" were.

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They used all arts against all rules,
As Dido did. The gentlemen,
Much like Aenæas, looked like fools,
And acting now as he did then,
First sighed, then blustered, lastly went:
Such is the heroic temperament.

They went to see the Pope at Rome,
To beg his Holiness's pardon:
And though the Suisse said "Not at home",
They caught him reading in the garden:
Down furiously the book he slammed,
And bellowed "You may both be damned."

In this some hold the Pope was wrong,
And went by much beyond his brief:
But that's no matter to my song,
Nor can it give us great relief
That Lettenhove speaks of a stick
Which played the old Tannhäuser trick,
Bourgeoning into buds of pity,
After our friends had left the city.
The Pope, he adds, was quite upset,
And owned he'd spoken out of pet,
Was strangely troubled for their fate,
Sent absolution—all too late:
For which, he thinks, the Pope must go
To join his victims down below.

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You may conceive the lamentation
Of our poor knight on this occasion.
He was, like others of his nation,
A damned good fellow—only flabby—
Who, on the slightest provocation,
Would fight or weep. A speech so shabby
As this, he took to heart, because
His sense of sin increased his fears;
So, on the Milvian Bridge it was
His squire found him, bathed in tears,
And gathered it was his intent
To jump from off that monument.

And here our Pons was at his best;
He turned the scene from tears to laughter,
Said "Cheer-i-o" and all the rest
The case demanded: "Since hereafter
Our lot is bound to be unpleasant,"
Said he "let's think about the present;
And, since the Pope declares us sinful,
By God, old bean, let's have a skinfull.
Seeing Old Nick is whom we're meant for
We'll wait at least until we're sent for;
I see no sort of use in hurry
Or going half-way to meet worry.
Since when we're dead we'll roast for lust
Let's put off dying till we must;
And since to roast foredoomed I am,
Why liefer for a sheep than lamb;

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Before we reach the Christian hell,
There is another—you know well."
The knight deplored this shallow mood,
But let Pons lead him where he would.

"And they are gone: aye, ages long ago,"
(That is from Keats),—gone without absolution,
Or penitence; nor have we means to know
If they regret their hasty resolution.
Only La Sale, the encomiast of marriage,
(And author of a book still more surprising*)
In 1420 coming in his carriage,
Or on his mule, here archaeologizing
In Umbria, heard this curious story:
And thinking that there might be more he,
As I have said, stopped at the tavern,
And even climbed up to the cavern,
Whereon, confirming what he'd heard,
He puzzled out this awful word—
I give it as the author gave it—
"Her Hans Wanbranbourg (*sic*) *intravit*":
I give it just as it was writ
HER HANS WANBRANBOURG
INTRAVIT.

Years later, Monsieur Gaston Paris,
That learned Frenchman, came this way.

* From this strange book well named '*La Salade*'
I draw the matter of my ballad.

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It poured with rain. He could not tarry.
He gave the cave a single day.
He noticed that the mouth was blocked
And asked the peasants 'why', who, shocked,
Informed him how on summer nights
The Sybil and her horrid sprites
Came out and danced their hellish jigs,
And crushed the corn and scared the pigs.
On which unamiable narration
The *savant* made this observation—
That they were very simple fools
To put their trust in masons' tools,
Seeing that fiends, our souls' ill-wishers,
Slip slyly through the smallest fissures.
And, in effect, for all their skill,
The peasants owned, *they dance there still.*

O Hans Van Branbourg, I applaud
You first, remembering you're a lord;
And next the not-to-be-forgot,
Your squire and my compatriot,
Him, Pons. For since we're far from sure
If Heaven will prove a sinecure,
And seeing that it's quite uncertain
What fate awaits beyond the curtain;
Seeing you wanton down the years,
While we are in the vale of tears,
And even thus the odds are even
On waking up in Hell or Heaven,

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While many hold the odds not small
Against our waking up at all;
I can't but think that you were wise
To choose the Sibyl's paradise:
I say it with a heavy heart,
I think you chose the better part.

For in man's dire perplexity,
The old and best philosophy
Holds that a woodcock in the shop is
Well worth a couple in the coppice,
And tons of may-be bliss don't measure
One ounce of certain, solid pleasure.
Whence, once in Anchiale's city
Aristobulus found this witty
Inscription cut with wise intent,
Upon an ancient monument,
ΕΣΘΙΕ ΠΙΝΕ ΠΑΙΖΕ, thus,
By good king Sardanapalus,
"Eat, drink, and—well, the rest's not worth a cuss."

And so, my friends, though your adventure
May get from others only censure,
Though curates and idealists
May call you 'rank materialists',
And pompous atheistic prigs,
'Blind-worms' and 'Hedonistic pigs';
Though other men, and wise ones too,

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May hold that there is more to do
Than laugh and let the world go by
Saying "To-morrow we shall die";
Yet in a matter so obscure
Wise men may differ to be sure.
Myself, I never thought it clever
To fuss about the "grand forever",
And cultivate a soul with care for
That vast but vague hereafter; wherefore
In my opinion, you did well
To live for love, though love is hell.

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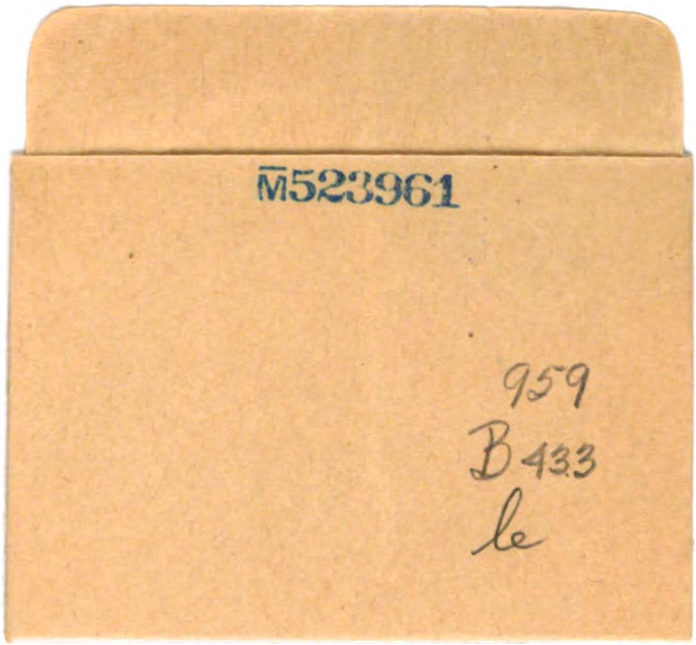
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